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## DECORATIVE ART.

LECTURE DELIVERED BY MR. EDWIN H. BLASHFIELD.

THE following is merely a sketch of Mr. Blashfield's very interesting talk, and only a fragment of the true lecture as he delivered it; it was full of anecdotes and interesting reminiscences of the old masters and their work, and was illustrated by about thirty fine photographs of important works, and six or eight large studies in oil made by Mr. Blashfield while in Europe. The lecture was listened to by a very attentive and interested audience composed of art students, fresco painters, etc., and was delivered at the Gotham Art Students' rooms, on Sunday evening, January 18.

The first lecture of the series was delivered by Mr. J. Carrol Beckwith; the second by Mr. Walter Shirlaw, the third by Mr. Francis Lathrop. Mr. William M. Chase will follow and several other gentlemen will continue the course.

The above course of lectures was commenced at the Gotham Art Students' rooms for the benefit of the American Society of Fresco Painters in October last, for the purpose of bringing the artist and the fresco painter together for an exchange of views, and to stimulate the men to study and try to raise the standard of the workmen, but as the majority of the men are in favor of keeping the society entirely as a Trades Union, the lectures in future will be delivered for the benefit of those members only who are interested in their own advancement, and who wish to study and improve themselves. The American Society of Fresco Painters is composed of about fifty or sixty members; the officers are a president, elected at every meeting, a secretary, treasurer, and financial secretary; there is an accident fund, for the benefit of members who may meet with a mishap; the society regulates the wages of the members, and will, when required, furnish men in any branch of the trade to those requiring their service.

## GENTLEMEN:

I am going to try to talk to you to-night about the arts that you and I are working at.

First of all, as a great French artist has said, the term, decorative art, is a very unsatisfactory one, all good art should decorate. The Greek sculptor working at his temple, Michael Angelo working at the chapel of the Popes in Rome, were creating some of the noblest things that exist upon the earth; both of them belong to what we call decorative art.

But if you had asked them what they were at, they would have said simply "art," and been very much surprised if you had tacked a longer name on to it and called it "decorative art." They, like every artist, brought as much thought and enthusiasm to one kind of art as another.

And so we are all together here artists, whether we work in marble, wood, canvas, leather, metal, or what not, and I hope that all our work will prove decorative.

Now, as to the naturalness of art, people have told you again and again that art is a luxury, a thing that one must be educated up to, a thing to be paid for by the rich man, the great railroad man and the banker.

So in its more elaborate form it is, because to produce it a man must take a long time for training, and another long time for the execution of the actual work, and if living is dear, the artist must be well paid. But in a much broader sense, art is not a luxury, but a necessity. Much more than that, art is one of the very first instincts of man. Thousands upon thousands of years ago, ages before history began, when oceans stood where there is now dry land, and continents where oceans now are, there were artists. Men had barely learned to talk, probably they could only express very simple ideas; writing was a long way in the future.

But so long ago as that, if we could look back with our modern eyes, we should see a cave with its mouth blocked with fragments of rock to keep out the beasts, for outside there were tigers as big as oxen, and cave bears bigger than a yoke of oxen. Inside by the light of his fire, the man is carving upon the horn handle of his hunting knife or his stone hatchet a rude representation of a mammoth or a deer. There you have him—the artist. He saw the mammoths, hunted them, was

hunted by them, too, undoubtedly, then when he got home he had to have his attempt at carving them. There it was, the instinct perfectly natural and in the man, and coming pretty soon after the instinct for food and fire. And so it is with savage and uncivilized human beings even in our times. There are countries where a native woman does not at all mind going out of doors naked, but she would feel quite annoyed at having to go to any festival without some paint and beads upon her body.

Once, in one of our forts on the western plains, a drunken Indian woman was shut up in the guard house, she broke into the postmaster's desk, took off all her clothes, and while the regiment was on dress parade the squaw appeared on the parade ground her body stuck all over with three-cent postage stamps; she took to her decoration naturally, and so you see it is not entirely by choice that we are artists. We can't help it, its in men from the beginning. They have those very carved knife handles to-day; they are rough things, for the men's knives were only sharpened bits of flint. But rough as they are, there's no mistaking the art or the subject, and this the so-called decorative art, that is art created to fill a particular place decided upon before hand, is the most natural art of all; for what is plainer than that men should adorn their dishes and weapons and objects in constant use long before they created works to be simply hung up on walls and admired.

For a long while in modern times we had most foolishly reversed all this, useful things did not need to be handsome. A handsome thing was to be made expressly and then stuck up anywhere as an ornament. Fortunately, within the last twenty years, we have been getting back to the right thing again, and it's surprising to see how soon a man learns to enjoy his coffee more out of a cup with a good and graceful shape, than out of a clumsy and ugly one. Mind you, I don't say that a good cup is an excuse for bad coffee, only a good cup puts a dash more of pleasure in it, that is like an extra lump of sugar, for instance.

Now about the greatness of our art: In times when art in general has been at a low ebb, there have almost always been some very good masters in the way of painters of easel pictures. But whenever you find that the workers of metal and leather and furniture and little things are artists, then be sure that you've hit upon a real, great art epoch.

The art that flourishes in the valley of the river Nile, that of Egypt, is the first that we know anything about. In the earliest monuments that remain, it seems to have already almost reached perfection.

We have found the source of the Nile, a thing the Egyptians were unable to do, but the beginning of Egyptian art lies too far back for us. They were a very great and interesting people, and the most of what we know about them we know through their decorative painters. On the walls of the great ruins they show us the Egyptians of three, four and five thousand years ago, hunting, fishing, marrying, burying, cooking, dancing, and following every kind of work or pleasure.

No nation on earth ever painted out its daily history as the Egyptians did, and they had a supreme gift of decoration by instinct, by training and by science, which is a combination of the two. We have not time—if we had it would be interesting—to say how cleverly they took advantage of the natural conditions of their curious country to do appropriate and magnificent decoration.

After Egypt we come to the Greeks, the greatest art people that have yet existed, and nowhere nor at any time has art so entered into the things of daily life; we find fine pottery long before fine statues, and the little clay figures by the potters of Tangara are famous the world over. After the Greeks the Romans, and the splendid mosaic work of later Greeks.

Then things began to get worse. The Romans went to pieces. The Barbarians came down from the north (the Barbarians, those were our forefathers, yours and mine,) and for some hundred years art had a very bad time of it.

At last the Gothic cathedrals began to rise, examples as beautiful in their way as any that had gone before, and journeymen stone cutters began to carve angels and saints and whole stories in stone, and all this embroidery in stone, these figures of saints and kings and heroes, bible stories and even devils and fiends were carved, not after the design of the master architect, but according to the idea of each individual stonecutter. Here would be a man who has already a reputation for being able to carve lovely faces; he would be doing angels and saints and Madonnas and so on, another man who has a natural inclination for the

droll and the grotesque will be working at devils and animals out of which he makes waterspouts for the towers, and so the whole cathedral front becomes carved bible history, and the handicraft men have made it, and each individual has helped not only to build but to decorate it.

And in Italy the old masters, as we call them, began to live and work. Italy became the center of the art world, the city of Florence was the center of Italian art and just about the center and heart of the city was a certain bridge called the Old Bridge, because it had stood firm when others had been carried away by the freshets. This bridge was covered (in the old fashion) with houses and shops. These were the goldsmiths' shops, and out of these came many of the most famous of the old masters; first they did little things in gold and silver, ring settings, chains and buckles, then they painted on panels, then great wall pictures; now their pictures are worth fortunes, great museums have bought such as they could, and the government of their country raises monuments to their dead artists in its cities, and puts a heavy duty on the exportation of their pictures, not wishing that such treasures should leave Italy.

Take one of these old goldsmiths for instance; dead now some four hundred years, Domenico Ghirlandajo, a clumsy hard name, but famous in art. Domenick the garland maker, it means.

First he made wreaths for the Florentine girls, by and by he painted a great church and parts of many others; as his work grew so did his inclinations. One day he said he wished they would give him the whole walls of the city to paint.

Hear what Michael Angelo, perhaps as great an artist as ever lived, said about decoration. He said that fresco was the only medium for men, oil was for women. The reasonableness of all. Many people go into art, particularly into decorative art, with the idea that a great liking for it, combined with what they call natural taste, will see them through. A great mistake. Natural taste is simply an instinctive liking for a thing. Training must come too. Training, that is to say, the learning to reason upon the thing, else you may go on experimenting forever, and your successes, if any, will be lucky shots. But with training you immensely increase the chances of success of your experiment. When it is successful you want to know why and *vice versa*; when a combination is good depend on it it doesn't merely happen to strike you well, there's a reason for it, and you can learn to work it out almost like a sum in arithmetic.

In great epochs the people have always taken great account of these governing natural laws and conditions.

Everything good has been developed from something before it; art was in a bad way when Nicolas, of Pisa, by seeing and studying and using what had gone before, gave it more impulse in twenty-five years than it had in another two hundred. Great men have not feared to imitate good things. Raphael took Maraccio's figures and so on.

As the locomotive has been perfected piece by piece, so is art.

Don't do yourselves violence in trying to be original. When you've digested the *laws* and *practice*, your own individuality will begin to tell. Beware of trying too hard to make an impression on the public by beating your neighbor. If you are not in an exhibition, but on a decoration together remember that if either succeeds at the expense of the other, or by putting out the other man's work, the whole decoration will suffer and he with it.

You ask me to leave my manuscript. I will do so, but it is *not* a manuscript, only a rough running together of notes to jog my memory, there being no attempt at smooth phrasing or avoidance of repeated words. The whole isn't intended for a *lecture* to be read, but for a talk merely. I want to emphasize the necessity for a knowledge of the laws of the beautiful and appropriate in decorating, and for harmony between the architect and decorator. Also to bear a little upon the greatness of all art and the impossibility of arbitrary separation between any of the different sorts of art.

That's about the gist of it.

Yours truly,  
EDWIN H. BLASHFIELD.

